

Explore the Bible: March 14

CELEBRATE • Luke 15:20-32

By Laura Lee Leathers



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Have you ever lost something? I have! One particular day, it was all my keys. For two weeks I radically searched and retraced my steps, all to no avail. Finally, it occurred to me to pray. Later when I was digging in the freezer, I found them stuck between the butter beans and bread. Believe me, there was a celebration!

As you study this lesson, make a note that this is one of the most powerful chapters in the Bible. It stands out because here we see the joy of God. Note the repentance and forgiveness, the mercy and grace, the sinner and the saved, the self-righteous, and the righteous.

In Luke 15:1-7, the shepherd searches for one lost sheep. In 15:8-10, a woman searches for a lost coin. Then in 15:11-32, known as the parable of the prodigal son, we see the contrast of the law and grace.

Opening the chapter, we read how the Pharisees were criticizing Jesus as one who “welcomes sinners and eats with them (15:2).” Jesus’ response throughout the three parables was to demonstrate how God values all people and their need to repent and be forgiven.

The tale of two sons, equally loved by their father, begins in

verse 11. The younger son demands his inheritance, leaves home, and lives foolishly. The consequences of his choices have left him destitute, homeless, starving, and begging. In verse 17, we read, "...but when he came to himself," he says, "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants (ESV).'"

Forgiveness granted. (Luke 15:20-24) How would his father react? The son had nothing to offer or boast. He had spent everything and disgraced his family; the pigs had it better than he did. The father, filled with compassion and hope, saw his son from a long way off. He ran, which was not typical in that day, threw his arms around his son's stinking neck, and kissed him repeatedly. What a display of grace!

For the Pharisees listening to Jesus, the father's behavior was shocking and shameful. It was not honorable for the father to react this way. According to the law, the son should have been beaten and made a servant.

In 15:21, "Father" has a humbler tone as the son presents his request for mercy – and notice how the son leaves out his willingness to become one of the servants (15:18-19). The father's response is one of reconciliation, restoration, and forgiveness. He ordered the best robe, a ring, and shoes be brought for his son, and slaughtered a fattened calf for the celebration of his son's return. The father explains the son was "lost and is found." The response: "And they began to celebrate" (15:24).

Resentment expressed. (Luke 15:25-30) The older son returns from working in the fields and hears music and dancing. There is great joy at home. Yet as the older brother comes closer, he's already determined he wants no part of the festivities even after his father pleads with him to join. He is angry. Was it because his brother wasn't getting

the punishment he deserved? Was it jealousy, or did he see his future and how this would affect his inheritance?

The spiritual conditions and attitudes of each son were at opposite ends of the spectrum. One represents the Pharisees and the other a repentant sinner.

Reality defined. (Luke 15:31-32) The loving and gracious father reaches out to both sons, showing the same generosity and grace. He reminds the older son that “everything I have is yours,” and that he was eligible to receive a double portion (see Deut. 21:17). The father hopes that his son will repent and embrace salvation also. What is his choice? We aren’t told the rest of the story.

In his sermon, God’s Great Joy in Redemption, John MacArthur gives this example of the ending: “Upon hearing this, the older brother was outraged, picked up a piece of wood and beat his father to death in front of everyone. You say, ‘That’s a little extreme.’ But it would only be a few months until they kill Christ with wood, and congratulate themselves that they had killed this offeror of grace and preserved their self-righteous legalism... The story ends at the cross, and we find our salvation there, don’t we?”

Recall the joy you’ve experienced in your celebrations. Now try to imagine the joy of God, the angels, and all of heaven over one sinner who repents (15:7, 10). There is no greater joy than to share the Gospel, and through the power of the Holy Spirit to lead to someone to Christ. Are you sharing the Good News?

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